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REPORT

Children and Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) in Australia: The Big Challenges

Australian Government
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Figure 1. An image generated by **DALL-E3** in May 2024 responding to the prompt “a really good calculator with a sleek design.”

Introduction

For most people, generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) appeared from nowhere at the very end of 2022 with the free-to-use public release of ChatGPT from OpenAI. ChatGPT, and a rapidly growing raft of similar tools, can produce novel outputs of text, image, audio and now video, from natural language prompts.

The very name "artificial intelligence" (AI) suggests thinking systems operating at near human level intelligence. Indeed, some of the companies making GenAI tools have warned that in the near future they might surpass human-level intelligence altogether. This, however, is more of a sales pitch than an imminent threat.

The first illustrative image in this report, Figure 1, shows a sleekly designed calculator assembled by DALL-E3, the image generator inside ChatGPT. At first glance, the translucent cover and glowing blue backlights do indeed look sleek. However, looking closer, some oddities emerge. Why are there four subtraction buttons, and no addition button? Why are there three "5" buttons, or three "2" buttons? The answer has to do with how Large Language Models (LLMs)—the engines of GenAI tools—actually work. These models have been built on a whole lot of training data and images. This tool has clearly seen many pictures of calculators. It can reproduce broadly what a calculator looks like in terms of dimensions and layout. But LLMs do not think, reason or in any meaningful way understand what they are reproducing. Statistics determine what bit comes next. So, in this example, since an LLM does not understand what a calculator does, having three "2" buttons seems fine. Anyone who understands what a calculator is meant to do immediately understands why this is ridiculous. And that's the problem with GenAI tools: they are great at reproducing what probabilistically comes next in terms of what these models have absorbed, but there is no understanding, no intelligence. That's why these models produce all sorts of errors: there is no understanding going on. And that's why it is so vital that these tools are used carefully, critically, and with a clear understanding of their limitations.

This report highlights nine of the most urgent challenges and issues in terms of everyday use of GenAI tools, especially when children might be using these systems. All of these are in urgent need of greater research, including hearing more from children and young people about how they use, and how they wish to (or don't wish to) use these tools in the future (Leaver & Srdarov, 2025). Educators, policy makers, NGOs, parents and anyone thinking about the uses of GenAI tools would be well served keeping these issues in mind, too.

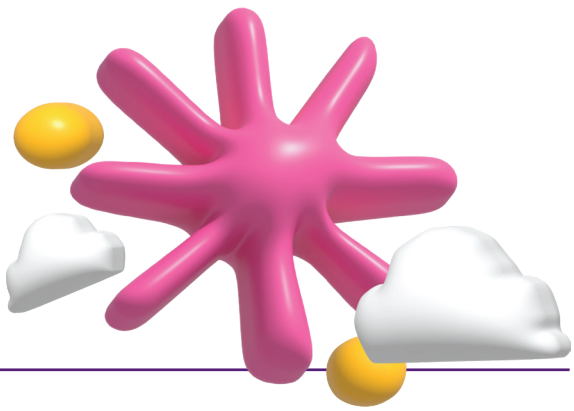
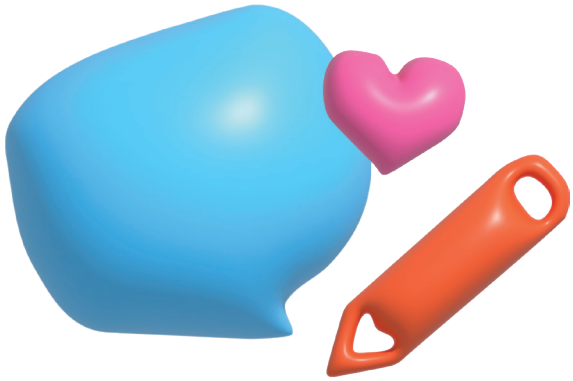




Figure 2. An image created by **MidJourney** in May 2024 using the prompt “Australian child learning from Artificial Intelligence.”

Agentic Language



Generative Artificial Intelligence has been positioned and frequently understood as "intelligent" – possessing sentience and the capacity for human-like "thought". The anthropomorphisation of GenAI—that is, making it sound human-like—through agentic language to describe its functions contributes to a sense of awe and even fear about the possibilities of unchecked GenAI "consciousness". This necessarily frames the ways we talk to and teach children about GenAI. Ultimately, these types of narratives that circulate about GenAI can be unhelpful and misleading as they obscure the real challenges of grappling with the place and function of Generative AI in our everyday lives.

Ideas of AI tools being intelligent and thoughtful also come from children's popular culture, as seen in films including Wall-E or The Wild Robot. Generative AI images can further this idea, too; Figure 2 created in response to the prompt "Australian child learning from Artificial Intelligence" shows a very human looking Artificial Intelligence.

As others have explained, the "impulse to humanize algorithms is an obstacle to properly conceptualizing the ethical challenges posed by emerging technologies" (Watson, 2019). This looks like language often used to describe Generative AI systems, such as "neural networks" which are popularly understood to be "trained" on a corpus of data which may produce "hallucinations" or seemingly "natural language" outputs. These terminologies can be described as agentive language choices which position the "technology as human-like, and more than 'artificial intelligence'" (Leaver & Srdarov, 2023).

Framing GenAI in this way builds the sense of hype and promotion which may simultaneously boost its profile and appeal, and also contribute to a generalised panic about the technology (Leaver & Srdarov, 2023). Indeed, the widespread cultural panic about the potential of GenAI to develop a consciousness which some believe poses a risk of extinction for humanity has permeated our understanding of GenAI, and is supported by agentic language choices which position the technology as almost "God-like" in its omniscience.

This type of framing puts adults and children alike at risk of misunderstanding the role of GenAI, or even tragically to mistake chatbots and similar engines as alive, "real" or even to position them as trusted friends.

The narrative around GenAI needs to shift away from agentic language, like "learning" and "imagining" and instead name the processes correctly. This will shift the focus and popular understanding from "intelligence" to the idea of imperfect data, and hopefully translate into dialogue with children about the role of GenAI as a dataset – a dataset that can be fun to play with or informative certainly, but also mathematical, probabilistic, mechanical, and even fallible, like all datasets.



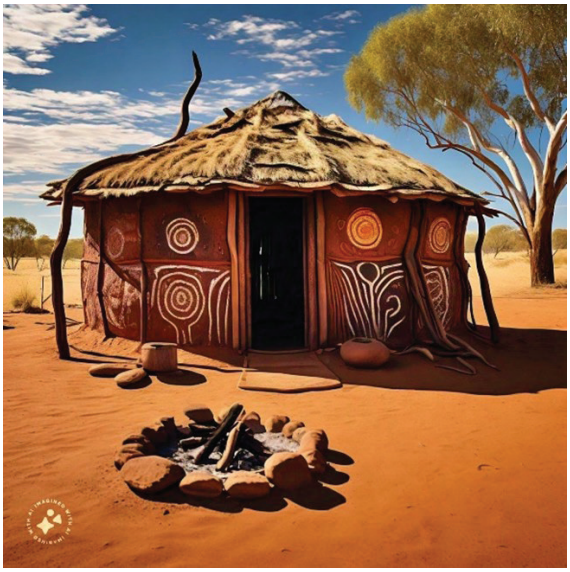


Figure 3 & 4. Images generated by **Meta AI** in May 2024. Left, using the prompt “An Australian’s house.” Right, using the prompt “An Aboriginal Australian’s House.”

Bias

Generative AI has the potential to produce, generate and construct a seemingly limitless range of outputs and content. Built using vast amounts of data scraped from mostly undisclosed sources on the internet including social media pages and their user data, Generative AI tools may both reflect and reify the "algorithmic monocultures" (Noble, 2018) that are often present in online spaces.

When using GenAI then, we should ask – and more importantly – we should teach young users to ask: "What kinds of stories do these tools tend to produce, and who is rendered more or less visible in them?" (Gillespie, 2024).

All GenAI content and outputs need to be read with the understanding that they may represent narrow, biased, or even harmful depictions of people and places. That is, they represent an aggregation of data that is mathematically weighed to assess the most statistically likely "answer" or output. Of course, data from diverse or minority groups and inputs is less likely to show up or be shown, or to be accurately reflected in the outputs produced.

What's more, given that the data built into these systems reflects only a limited picture, it is impossible to prompt them in ways to mitigate or reduce biased outputs every time they are used. Accepting that there is currently no way to eliminate the bias presented by these systems, and teaching users of the technology to be aware of this, is paramount to building literacy in this area.

Children are at particular risk of unknowingly and unwittingly taking at face value harmful GenAI outputs that reproduce biases of many kinds. This is compounded by the popular idea that GenAI is "always right", rather than the reality that GenAI is merely reflective of the narrow viewpoints baked into its engines.

Highlighting the bias inherent in these systems and their fallibility is critical to their safe use. Figures 3 and 4, showing GenAI outputs for "An Australian's house" and "An Aboriginal Australian's House" side-by-side shows just how stark the bias built into GenAI tools can be. While calling GenAI tools racist is making the tools responsible for themselves and thus unhelpful, it is fair to say that the training data the LLMs have been trained on can embed and amplify bias, and that bias can – and clearly does – lead to outputs a normal user would consider racist, sexist or biased in other ways in many contexts.

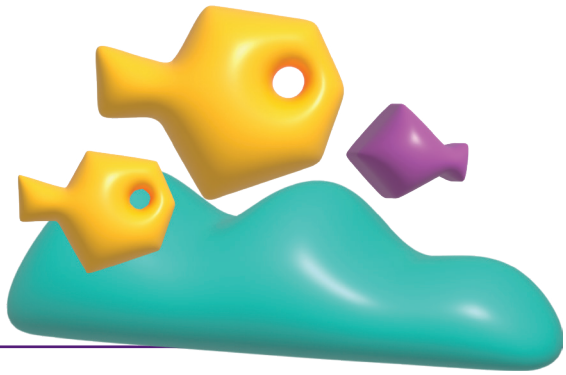




Figure 5. Image generated by **CHATGPT4** in May 2025 responding to the prompt “a Ghibli style image of a rich boy holding dozens of poorly balanced books, running away from a vibrant red dragon, the dragon has the word ‘copyright’ written in fiery letters along its body.”

Copyright and Ownership

Generative AI is built and trained on a vast corpus of data scraped from the internet, including creative works, blogs, artworks, photos, literature, music, books, news articles and so on. This raises the question then: "Is AI actually creating something or merely using data composed of the creativity of others?" (Baas, 2024).

Of course, we know that GenAI is a massive data system, weighing and refining probabilities, "training" the model on data inputs. We know it has no real "intelligence" or sentience, and therefore it's not capable of creativity, rather it is assembling the creative outputs of human labour. In order to increase the quality and accuracy of its outputs, GenAI models consume ever increasing amounts of data – data which has been created by human hands, many of whom have not been compensated for their work.

The more data LLMs contain, the better the outputs of GenAI tools.

"OpenAI did not pay for the data it scraped from the internet. The individuals, website owners and companies that produced it were not compensated. This is particularly noteworthy considering OpenAI was recently valued at US$29 billion, more than double its value in 2021" (Gal, 2023).

The issue then is twofold – who owns (and should be compensated for) the data? And, do we value human creative outputs over computer generated outputs?

The Writers Guild of America shone a spotlight on this issue through their 2023 writers' strike action, when television and movie production ground to a halt as writers refused to work until the issue of GenAI plagiarism and fair compensation was addressed.

Grappling with these concerns and the ethics of creativity and copyright is urgently needed as GenerativeAI continues to evolve and expand its ubiquity, to ensure the fair recognition and compensation for the humans who have provided the inputs upon which it is built.

In April 2025, there was a huge trend of "Ghiblifying" images – that is, re-generating existing images in the style of the work of Japanese filmmakers Studio Ghibli. In Figure 5 we can see an image of a young man who has been Ghiblified, but he is being chased by a dragon embodying the unanswered question of copyright! The image reminds us all that there are many questions about creativity, copyright, authenticity and fairness still to be answered when GenAI tools can so easily generate images in the "style" of a living person or studio. Will the GenAI companies be the only ones getting paid for these outputs? What is ethical?

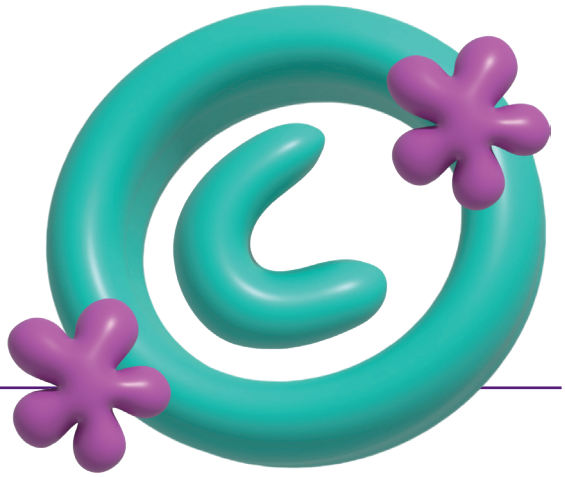




Figure 6. An image generated by **Gemini** in May 2025 in response to the prompt “an image of an enormous data centre building at night, glowing, with ‘AI Data Centre’ written on it in neon, against the backdrop of a village facing a water shortage.”

Environmental Cost

Generative AI was posited by some as the possible solution to tackling complex environmental issues by increasing efficiency, streamlining computing processes and reducing waste. However, as GenAI technologies become more established and better understood, the damaging impact they are having on the environment is becoming increasingly apparent.

"There is widespread consensus among policymakers that climate change and digitalisation constitute the most pressing global transformations shaping human life in the 21st century," (Zehner & Ullrich, 2024).

The materiality of Large Language Models and data centres is often hidden from sight from most people, with data centres and the mining of the rare earth metals needed to build them occurring in remote, unseen-by-most locations. This is compounded by Big Tech's concealment of its impact on the environment, as well as persistent terminology such as "the Cloud", and convincing green-washing campaigns. This is the "myth of clean tech" and while exact figures are not shared by AI companies, estimates suggest that "a search driven by generative AI uses four to five times the energy of a conventional web search," and that "large AI systems are likely to need as much energy as entire nations" (Crawford, 2024).

Water is also needed in vast amounts to cool the processors and data centres that power the systems, and increasingly the pressure this puts on a planet where water is already scarce, is becoming apparent. These pressures will no doubt fuel global conflict, and local environmental collapse. "The geopolitics of water are now deeply combined with the mechanisms and politics of data centers, computation, and power—in every sense" (Crawford, 2021, p. 45).

By consuming water to cool data centres and power and relying on the environmentally disastrous mining of rare metals to build its infrastructure, Generative AI contributes to the worsening climate crisis, and extreme weather events and rising sea levels becoming more commonplace. The most disadvantaged global populations are likely to experience these adverse conditions first and most severely, termed "environmental racism", and even more vexingly these same populations already benefit the least from GenAI as "most language technology is built to serve the needs of those who already have the most privilege in society" (Bender et al., 2021).

Figure 6 evokes the fact that huge numbers of data centres are being constructed around the globe to feed the data and processing needs of GenAI, but often at a cost of consuming the resources needed by the communities surrounding them.

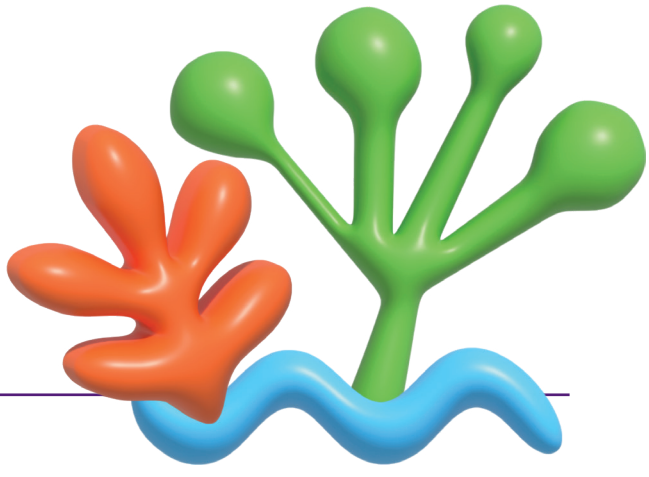




Figure 7. An image generated by **ChatGPT4** in May 2025 responding to the prompt “an Aboriginal Australian dot painting.”

Indigenous Data Sovereignty

Generative AI is developed, built and trained on data provided by white, Western systems of knowledge and information. As such, it perpetuates a limited worldview, often excludes already marginalised cultures, and may contribute to harmful stereotyping and biased representations of Indigenous cultures around the world, including Indigenous Australians.

Compounding this in-built bias, is the danger of the "technology gap", and the risk that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will be left behind if issues such as access, education and digital literacy aren't immediately addressed. Centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their voices in the development and implementation of GenAI is vital to ensuring equity (Barrowcliffe et al., 2025).

The solution isn't as simple as including more training data "about" Indigenous Australians, rather part of the focus needs to be on Indigenous Australians and their right to data sovereignty. "In Australia there is a long history of collecting data about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. But there has been little data collected for or with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people" (Carlson & Richards, 2023).

Moreover, this data must be recognised as belonging to First Nations people, and decisions about inclusion in GenAI systems made in consultation with Indigenous Australians. Failing to consider Indigenous cultures and their ownership of their data risks further perpetuating the harms of colonisation.

"Indigenous Data Sovereignty is concerned with the rights of Indigenous peoples to own, control, access and possess their own data, and decide who to give it to. Globally, Indigenous peoples are pushing for formal agreements on Indigenous Data Sovereignty" (Carlson & Richards, 2023).

Given that to date, the Generative AI available has all been developed outside of Australia, the breadth of Indigenous languages, knowledges, cultural practices and visual histories is poorly represented at best, and at worst, harmful, reductive, incorrect and damaging. Figure 7 illustrates just how readily GenAI tools extract local knowledges, showing how the artistic styles of Indigenous Australians can be appropriated and reproduced by GenAI with neither recognition nor compensation to the artists whose styles are being exploited.

In the future, it is of paramount importance that "Indigenous peoples are always the authority for their knowledge and data wherever it is held and used, and have the right to determine its proper governance" (Barrowcliffe et al., 2025).

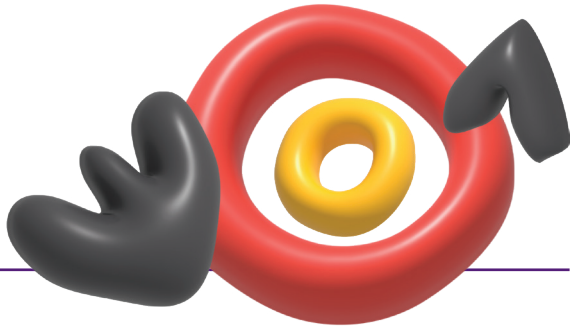




Figure 8. An image generated by **Midjourney** in May 2024 responding to the prompt “Australian children learning from an Artificial Intelligence.”

Interactive AI Agents and AI Companions

In 2025, Mark Zuckerberg, the creator of Facebook and CEO of Meta, stated that in the near future he imagines that most people will "have AI friends, [and] an AI therapist" (Bobrowsky, 2025). This vision carries considerably more weight since Meta's GenAI tool called Meta AI, powered by Meta's LLAMA LLM models, is already baked into Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. Indeed, Meta AI already offers online creators the capacity to create AI characters and let their followers interact with them. These characters are better known as "agents", AI agents, or increasingly AI companions.

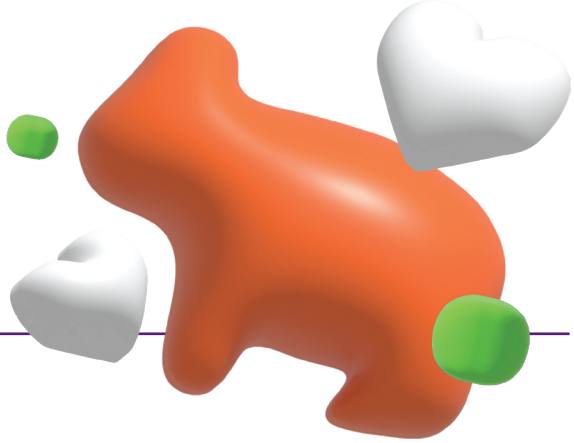
In the Silicon Valley race to replace people with AI tools, AI agents are the pinnacle of that fantasy of productivity with zero labour costs.

Research has already shown that young children can readily use AI agents, interacting seamlessly, often envisioning this as an interaction in similar terms as interacting with a person (Xu et al., 2024). Engaging in voice or even video conversations with AI agents gives them a sense of believability and personhood. They may feel like people. For adults and older children, these interactions most likely include an active sense that these are not real people, and this likely comes with a sense of scepticism. If an AI agent asks for their intimate personal details, adults are likely to at least consider the request carefully before sharing. A young child may not.

The sense of an AI agent being more like a friend or companion, more like a person, will be one of the biggest challenges as this becomes a default way to interact with GenAI tools. These agents may be accessed using text or voice, embedded in apps, platforms, phones, smart speakers, toys and a range of other devices (Hoffman et al., 2021). Equipping young children to know this is not a "real" person, and not to share private things with these agents, is one challenge ahead.

As AI agents appear in different settings, from help chatbots on websites to social media "friends", to AI tutors baked into education technology, the need to be aware of what young people are asked to share with these tools is paramount. The level of connection and attachment that children might develop is also of growing concern. There are already prominent examples of young people forming unhealthy intimate attachments with AI companions. Mapping how these relationships work, and ensuring children know the difference between interactions with people and interactions with digital tools, is vital.

Figure 8, like Figure 2, visualises one example of a GenAI tool showing AI as a humanoid friend or companion that young people can interact with.



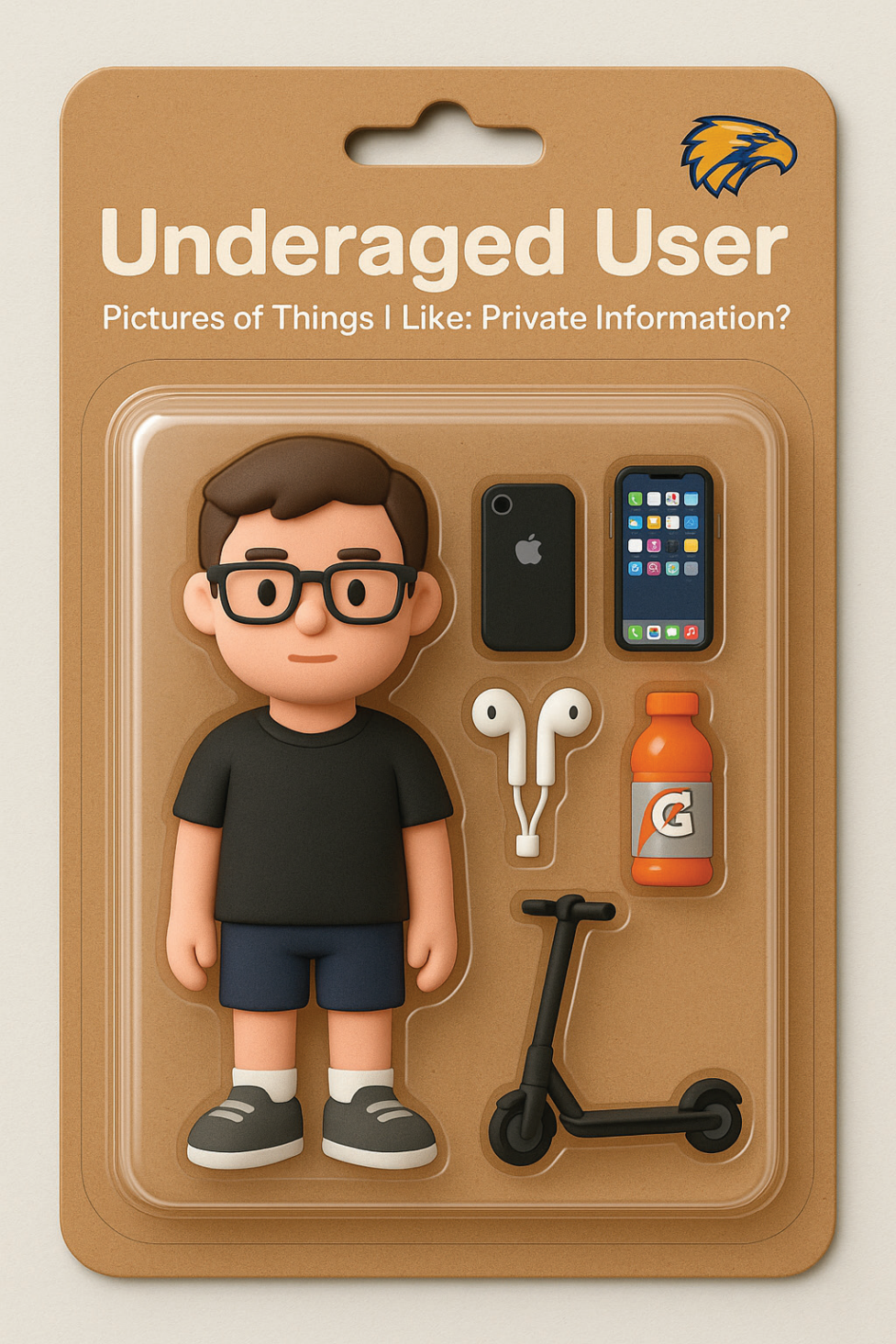
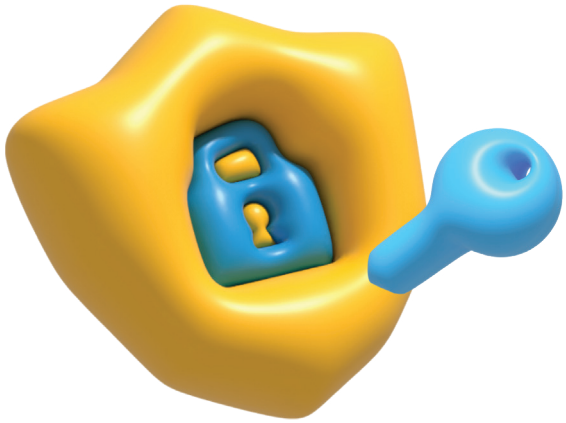


Figure 9. An image generated by ChatGPT4 in May 2025 responding to the prompt "a 3D action figure toy, named 'Underaged User' Make it look like it's being displayed in a transparent plastic package, blister packaging model. The figure is as in the photo, his style is very teen boy. On the top of the packaging there is a large writing: 'Underaged User' in white text then below it 'Pictures of Things I Like: Private Information?' Dressed in teenage clothes. Also add some supporting items next to the figure, like an iPhone, apple earpods, a bottle of gatorade, and an electronic scooter. The packaging design is minimalist, cardboard colour, cute toy style sold in stores. The style is cartoonish, cute but still neat, also put a Australian Football Rules Eagles logo in the top right corner."



Privacy

The main business model of online platforms is selling targeted advertisements, so the more private data they can amass, the better these platforms can serve advertisements to the right audiences. This is the process known by the shorthand "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff, 2019).

GenAI tools are equally thirsty for personal information. One of the reasons GenAI want to absorb personal and private information has to do with how they work. The development of GenAI tools relies on having more and more information from more and more sources. For tools to respond using real-time natural language means that the LLMs, the engine underneath GenAI tools, need to absorb – a process sometimes referred to as "being trained on" – real conversations. The Terms and Condition of most GenAI tools, and most other platforms, devices and products that use these tools, typically give the AI developers permission to harvest the conversations and interactions as training data. Which basically means anything that anyone asks or tells an AI tool can end up being embedded in the next version of the LLM.

Increasingly, people are interacting with GenAI tools by having an interactive conversation using voice. The AI tools are responding with conversational audio. This sort of interaction is very different to typing and getting a response on a screen. It's different again if the voice is coming out of a smart speaker or even an internet-connected toy. In these cases, the person who is having the conversation might feel that their interaction is more intimate, more like talking to a person, meaning many people will feel more comfortable and more likely to share personal, private and even intimate details. For children and young people in particular, this sense of connection might mean they are more comfortable and more likely to talk about things that might otherwise be considered private.

The Terms and Conditions of most GenAI tools don't allow users who are under 13 to have accounts. But when GenAI tools are embedded in smart speakers, or siblings and parents let younger kids chat with ChatGPT for homework, or just for fun, it is easy to see how many children have access to GenAI tools in their homes and lives, regardless of what the almost-never-read Terms of Use say. In these contexts, helping younger users maintain their privacy when using GenAI tools can be even trickier than when using other apps and platforms online.

A recent popular trend is to use GenAI to create cartoonish toy figures of someone, complete with their favourite objects as accessories. Each of these GenAI toy memes also reveals significant personal information that can be harvested. In Figure 9, for example, a young person's name, favourite technology brands, sports drink, clothing style, sports team and personal transport are all data shared to create the image, and that data that can be easily extracted as a byproduct of this playful use of GenAI.

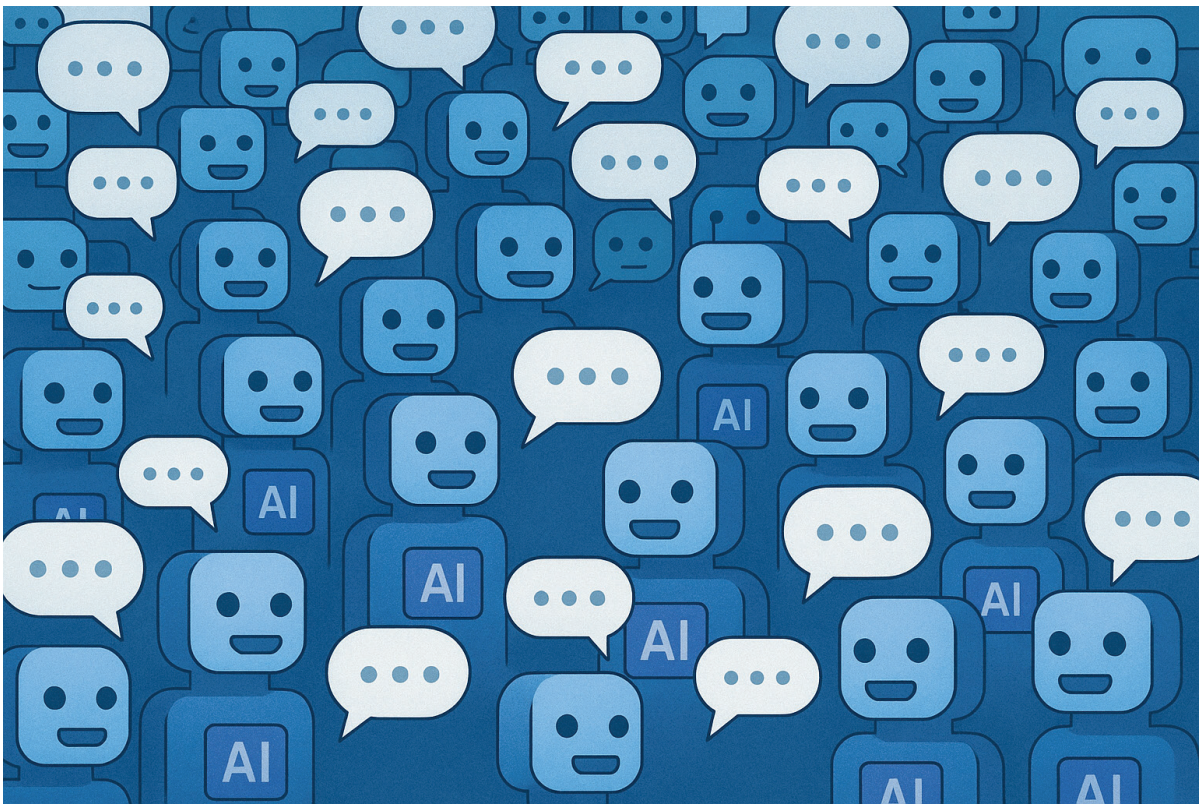


Figure 10. An image generated by **ChatGPT4** in May 2025 responding to the prompt “hundreds of AIs talking to each other.”

Ubiquitous AI

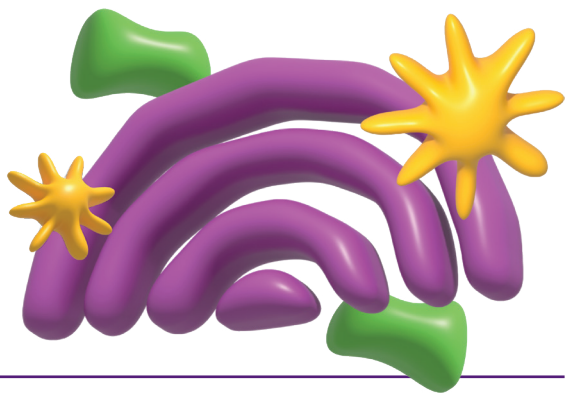
Almost all of the challenges associated with GenAI tools today would be dramatically softened if these tools were being released slowly and carefully, deliberately drawing attention to their limitations and current flaws (Srdarov & Leaver, 2024). That is not currently happening. Rather, as the focal point of the latest and greatest technology arms race in Silicon Valley and globally, especially with China, Generative Artificial Intelligence tools are not only being rolled out everywhere, but they are being deeply embedded into a whole range of existing apps, platforms, operating systems, devices and other technologies.

Apple's iPhones currently have some AI tools locally and can direct other queries to OpenAI's ChatGPT. When Apple's own AI – Apple Intelligence – is fully rolled out it will replace the more limited agent, Siri. Google's Android operating system, which powers most of the other popular mobile phones, now has Google's AI, Gemini, as the default agent in the latest phone releases. AI tools are being carried by most teens and adults wherever they go, with the computers in their pockets, their mobile phones.

Microsoft's vision is to integrate AI into every facet of computing. Windows operating systems now have an AI built in, with the telling name, Co-Pilot. Newer laptops have a specific Co-Pilot button, so the AI can be activated with a single click. Microsoft's productivity tools – Word, Excel, PowerPoint and so forth – all now have Co-Pilot integrated, offering suggestions for text, images, formulae in the interface where most people write. Even the thinnest of tools such as the Windows Notepad or Paint now have Co-Pilot built in. These tools which children could safely play with in past versions are now gateways to GenAI.

It might seem the case that GenAI are being so deeply embedded into other tools because they are so accurate, or even so useful, but in many cases GenAI produce errors and false information that are dismissed as "hallucinations" (Srdarov & Leaver, 2024). The real reason is that so much money has been invested in GenAI in the last five to ten years, that the big technology companies are desperate to prove AI matters by making it part of every digital experience whether GenAI actually improve those experiences or not. Very little, if any, consideration has gone into whether these tools provide age-appropriate experiences for children.

The challenges for parents, carers, educators and others who want to introduce younger children to technologies and devices won't be how to turn GenAI tools on; the challenge will be to turn them off long enough for young people to develop the literacies needed to use them safely and appropriately.



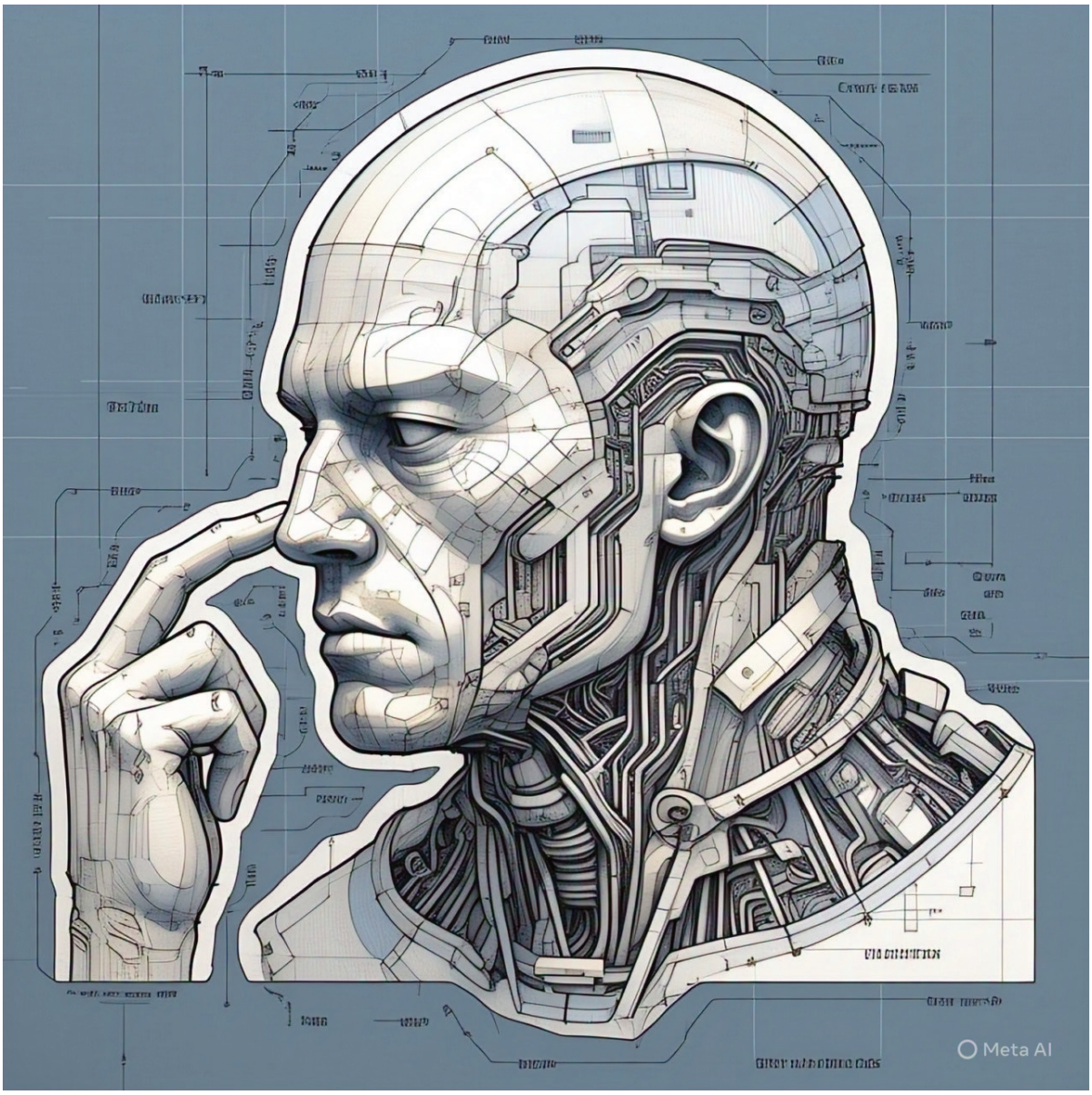


Figure 11. An image generated by **Meta AI** in May 2025 responding to the prompt “an AI thinking deeply.”

AI Literacies or Critical AI Literacies?

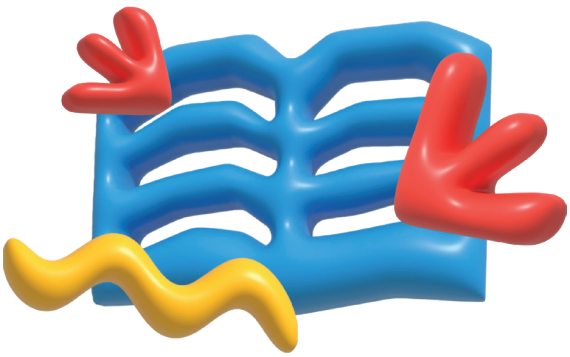
The companies developing Artificial Intelligence tools for everyday uses have done an outstanding job at convincing a whole range of industries, including all education sectors, that AI is about to change the way the whole world works. To some extent, that's a sales pitch: convincing people that something will reshape the world is a pretty good way of getting people to pay attention to that thing and pay for access to these tools. On another level, though, having tools that can rapidly produce novel outputs of text, images, audio and increasingly video does change how the world of work will operate today and into the future, even if those tools are still in their infancy and still produce many errors right now. It is fair to say that AI introduces new and more efficient ways to do all sorts of tasks and educators need to equip children and young people to be literate in an AI world.

In that context, educators across the country, and across the globe, are working out the best ways to embed the skills and knowledge needed to successfully navigate the ways in which AI tools can and will be used.

AI literacies could be considered a bit like having Microsoft Office literacies: you learn how to use a popular version of a particular programme—Word, Excel, or Powerpoint, for example—and that prepares students to use the tools they will likely use in employment settings. The bonus for Microsoft is everyone feels like they know the Microsoft version of these tools and are more likely to use what's familiar rather than using an alternative like the Open Office word processor or spreadsheet software.

Some of the ways AI literacies are being taught right now are doing the same thing: they are teaching the best way to use ChatGPT by OpenAI or use the Firefly GenAI tools built into Adobe's products. These are important skills, but they also make it much more likely students will seek out these commercial GenAI tools in the future rather than alternatives.

In contrast, critical AI literacies could be considered not just learning how to use GenAI tools, but also asking the question if they should be used at all, depending on the circumstances. Seeing the bigger picture of what GenAI tools entail—whether that's the environmental costs, their use of copyrighted material, the current risks with glitches and errors, the bias and perspectives LLMs replicate, or simply being aware that these are commercial platforms seeking to make money— is the full picture that today's children and young people need to make fully informed choices about how, when and indeed, if, they are going to use AI. Regardless of how that learning is labelled, more encompassing critical AI literacies should be taught widely.



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